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C O N F I D E N T I A L HAVANA 004970

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TAGS: PREL PGOV CU
SUBJECT: CASTRO: STILL NOT DEAD AND LOVING IT

REF: HAVANA 4932

(U) CLASSIFIED BY PRINCIPAL OFFICER MICHAEL G. KOZAK,
REASONS 1.5 (D).

¶1. (C) IN AN EFFORT TO DEFINITIVELY LAY TO REST RECENT RUMORS ABOUT THE DEATH OF FIDEL CASTRO, USINT OFFERS SOME ITEMS THAT MAY HELP DISPEL THE ALLEGATIONS.

CONG. CAMPBELL: FIDEL CASTRO APPEARED FIT

¶2. (C) FIDEL CASTRO WAS PRESENT FOR SOME TWO HOURS AT AN AUGUST 29 RECEPTION IN HONOR OF A U.S. GROUP ON A PRIVATE TRIP TO CUBA. THE GROUP INCLUDED CONGRESSMEN TOM CAMPBELL (R-CA) AND MARSHALL SANFORD (R-SC). CAMPBELL MADE A POINT OF DEBRIEFING PRINCIPAL OFFICER THE FOLLOWING MORNING. IN DESCRIBING CASTRO'S APPEARANCE DURING THE RECEPTION, CAMPBELL AND HIS WIFE SAID THEIR GENERAL IMPRESSION WAS THAT CASTRO SEEMED TO BE FIT FOR A 71-YEAR-OLD. CASTRO MOVED AND SPOKE SOMEWHAT CAUTIOUSLY, SAID CAMPBELL, BUT NOT UNUSUALLY SO FOR HIS AGE. DESCRIBING CASTRO, THE CAMPBELLS USED PHRASES LIKE "CASTRO LOOKED TO BE IN GOOD HEALTH FOR A MAN OF HIS AGE," "DID NOT HAVE A PAUNCH," "WAS INITIALLY CAUTIOUS IN WHAT HE SAID, BUT WARMED UP LATER," "HIS EYES FOCUSED WELL," AND "HE DID NOT HAVE A LOT OF ENERGY, BUT MOVED AROUND FINE." CAMPBELL NOTED THAT CASTRO STOOD THROUGHOUT THE TWO HOURS THAT THEY OBSERVED HIM DURING THE RECEPTION AND MENTIONED THAT CASTRO CONFESSED TO HAVING GIVEN UP DRINKING AS WELL AS COMMENTING ON THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF SMOKING. THESE COMMENTS OCCURRED IN THE COURSE OF A CONVERSATION WITH A U.S. NUTRITIONIST WHO WAS PART OF THE SAME GROUP. CASTRO SAID HE HAS ON DOCTOR'S ADVICE LOST WEIGHT AND EXERCISES "SOME," EATS YOGURT AND HAS QUIT DRINKING AS WELL AS SMOKING, AND FEELS GOOD. HE DRANK ORANGE JUICE DURING THE RECEPTION. CAMPBELL ADDED THAT CASTRO AGREED TO END THE RECEPTION WITH A PRAYER. REV. SUAREZ, OF THE CUBAN COUNCIL OF CHURCHES AND A MEMBER OF THE CUBAN NATIONAL ASSEMBLY (ANPP) BEGAN WITH THE WELL-KNOWN "BLESSED ARE THE PEACEMAKERS..." WHICH CASTRO FINISHED FOR HIM "...FOR THEY SHALL BE CALLED THE CHILDREN OF GOD."

¶3. (C) THE CAMPBELLS SAID THAT CASTRO WAS VERY SERIOUS DURING THE CONVERSATION THAT THEY AND OTHER MEMBERS OF THEIR GROUP HAD WITH HIM. THE CONVERSATION RANGED WIDELY, WITH CASTRO TAKING AN INTEREST IN VIRTUALLY EVERY TOPIC. CASTRO SPOKE ABOUT AIDS AND THE HIGH COST OF TREATING THE DISEASE; ABOUT THE "EL NINO" WEATHER PHENOMENON; WAS ATTENTIVE BUT REMAINED SILENT WHEN THE BENEFITS OF ALLOWING ACCESS TO THE INTERNET WERE MENTIONED; SPOKE IN PASSING OF THE NEED TO BE VIGILANT AGAINST CORRUPTION; AND WAS "EFFUSIVE" IN PRAISING EFFORTS BY SOME IN CONGRESS TO EXEMPT FOOD AND MEDICINE FROM THE EMBARGO. DURING THE CONVERSATION, CASTRO RETURNED A COUPLE OF TIMES TO PRAISING THE CHINESE MODEL OF ECONOMIC GROWTH WITH POLITICAL STABILITY AND SEEMED UNWILLING TO CRITICIZE CHINA. HE DID CRITICIZE RUSSIA, BUT SPOKE IN SOME DEPTH ON THESE MATTERS WITH MRS. CAMPBELL WHO RUNS A PROJECT IN RUSSIA PROMOTING FREE-MARKET PROCESSES.

¶4. (C) COMMENT: CONGRESSMAN AND MRS. CAMPBELL S

DESCRIPTION OF CASTRO AT THE AUGUST 28 RECEPTION IS ABOUT AS GOOD A FIRST-HAND ACCOUNT OF CASTRO AND HIS CURRENT STATE OF HEALTH AS ONE COULD HOPE FOR, SHORT OF A DOCTOR'S EXAMINATION. EARLIER THAT DAY, A USINT OFFICER SPOTTED CASTRO SITTING IN THE BACK OF HIS OFFICIAL CAR DRIVING ALONG THE MALECON AND CASTRO WAS RELIABLY REPORTED TO HAVE ATTENDED THE RECENT INDONESIAN NATIONAL DAY RECEPTION AFTER THE OTHER GUESTS, INCLUDING PRINCIPAL OFFICER, HAD DEPARTED. CLEARLY, CASTRO IS MOBILE, ALERT AND ALLOWING HIMSELF TO BE SEEN IN PUBLIC, UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL.

¶15. (C) CONGRESSMAN CAMPBELL HAS NOT HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO CLEAR THE FOREGOING ACCOUNT.

KOZAK